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AUTHOR Wyatt-Brown, A. M.
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ABSTRACT

Gerontologists have studied the role of memory and reminiscence in later life to see if life review leads to increased satisfaction in old age. Novelists offer some concrete examples of the varying ways that this review can affect the self-esteem of aging persons. Molly Keane, Elizabeth Bowen, and Peter Taylor all agree that late middle age provides a potential turning point in the lives of their characters. In fact, the action of their novels depends on the way in which the characters meet or fail to meet that challenge. These novelists write about intense, sensitive and inhibited people, who live in an upper-middle class milieu. Because their backgrounds have been socially constrained, at first growth in old age seems unlikely. Still all of the characters feel compelled to review their pasts in order to understand themselves better. The authors present this review in different ways, but two offer a modicum of hope. Of course, some characters cannot reassess their lives because they are committed to their old rationalizations. But those who can withstand the pain of self-revelation can sometimes transform their relationship with the past, an act which gives them some real hope for future happiness. (Author)

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Life Review in the Novels of Molly Keane, Elizabeth Bowen, and Peter Taylor

A. M. Wyatt-Brown

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A. M. Wyatt-Brown (Program in Linguistics, Univ. of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611). Life Review in the Novels of Molly Keane, Elizabeth Bowen, and Peter Taylor. The Gerontological Society of America, San Francisco, CA, November 19, 1988.

Gerontologists have studied the role of memory and reminiscence in later life to see if life review leads to increased satisfaction in old age. Novelists offer some concrete examples of the varying ways that this review can affect the self-esteem of aging persons. Molly Keane, Elizabeth Bowen, and Peter Taylor all agree that late middle age provides a potential turning point in the lives of their characters. In fact the action of their novels depends on the way in which the characters meet or fail to meet that challenge. These novelists write about intense, sensitive and inhibited people, who live in an upper-middle class milieu. Because their backgrounds have been socially constrained, at first growth in old age seems unlikely. Still all of the characters feel compelled to review their pasts in order to understand themselves better. The authors present this review in different ways, but two offer a modicum of hope. Of course, some characters cannot reassess their lives because they are committed to their old rationalizations. But those who can withstand the pain of self-revelation can sometimes transform their relationship with the past, an act which gives them some real hope for future happiness.

Life Review in the Novels of Molly Keane, Elizabeth Bowen, and Peter Taylor

Robert Butler (1963) in his landmark essay on life review describes several aspects of the life review phenomenon. First, the process of looking backwards in old age and reviewing one's life is universal. Second, this process accounts for increased reminiscences of the elderly. Third, it sometimes contributes to the occurrence of "late-life disorders" such as depression. At the same time, however, life review often "participates in the evolution of such characteristics as candor, serenity, and wisdom among certain of the aged." In general he believes that the review is a response to a crisis, most often imminent death. To formulate his thesis Butler drew upon his extensive clinical experience, but he also culled literary texts for more evidence. Today I would like to extend his literary culling by looking at three novels written by contemporary novelists: Molly Keane's Good Behaviour (1983), Elizabeth Bowen's The Little Girls (1982) and Peter Taylor's A Summons to Memphis (1987).

The experience of these three particular writers suggests that Butler's findings about life review must be slightly modified when discussing the lives of intensely creative people. First, novelists do not wait until old age before they reminisce; instead throughout the life-span they use retrospection as a narrative strategy. But in late-middle or early-old age the nature of their reminiscence shifts. Events often happen in late

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middle-age that shatter the compromises of the past. A family crisis, death of a close family member, or other traumas can trigger a review of the past that is quite different in quality from their previous interpretations. Although they go through troubled times, the changes in their fiction are startling and impressive.

All three novelists write about intense, sensitive and inhibited people, who live in an upper-middle class milieu. The characters are all convinced that the social rules that governed their youth were stultifying. Therefore they reminisce hoping to find what their real feelings might be. None of the protagonists is in full possession of the facts at the beginning; they tell their stories haltingly and sometimes repetitively, making small revisions as they go along, changes which indicate that the process of narrative reconstruction bears some resemblances to the narrative revisions of psychoanalysis (Schafer, 1983). Although none of the novels suggests that life review is a simple panacea for late-life depression, some of the characters work through their feelings of loss and despair by retelling their stories. The questions of importance to us are the following: How does author use reminiscence in the novel? What purpose does reminiscence serve the characters? What purpose does it serve the writer?

All of these novelists employ the concept of life review, but in very different ways. The first novelist, Molly Keane, has her main character, Aroon St Charles, experience an extended

flashback rather than a life review. Keane has two reasons for retelling the story of Aroon's childhood. The first motive was to explain the forces that shaped her character's destiny, but the second was to explain the forces that shaped her family's as well. Like Aroon St Charles, Keane cannot break free from the past and is inclined to blame her parents for her own problems and those of her sister.

The way in which most writers face old age is determined by a combination of their past experiences and the kind of late life crises they have endured. Molly Keane, an Anglo-Irish novelist, has had the most consistently difficult time. According to her own account and that of her friends, she had "an awful childhood" (Kierstead, 1986). Although she loved her mother, in adolescence she resented her lack of attention and became outwardly rebellious.

Keane's childhood has affected her view of aging and of generational conflict. Even in youth she described how the sins of the mothers--with the help of the fathers--are visited upon the children. The older generation mistreat the young, who grow up to despise their parents and to imitate their worst traits in many cases.

Arnold Toynbee has suggested that inheritance is more than mere genes. Children who feel comfortable at home choose to behave like their parents in many small ways. But when children feel alienated from their background, they may never "claim" their "voluntary legacy" (Brown, 1968). Toynbee's notions help

explain Molly Keane's deep sense of loss that marks her early work. Even when the author was young and optimistic, her novels suggest that she was afraid of what the future would bring.

Mid-life did not improve the situation. When she was 42 her husband died unexpectedly, leaving her with two small daughters to raise. For about 15 years she staved off depression by playing poker, cooking, and having love affairs (Kierstead, 1986). But when a play of her flopped in 1961, when she was 57, she stopped writing. Then in her late 60s, troubles with her older sister spurred her into action (Kierstead, 1986).[1]

Aroon is partly based on Keane's unfortunate sister Susan, who like Aroon, never married and in Keane's eyes had a pathetic life. She was not rebellious like her sister, so she never broke away from her parents' outmoded values. Susan's death convinced Molly that some individuals have been so damaged by their upbringing that they can never learn the lessons they need to survive. Shortly after her death Molly began exorcising her memory by writing Good Behaviour, but the novel's black humor rendered it unpublishable until 1981. One must remember, however, that writers rarely reduplicate characters and situations they have known. Peter Taylor suggests that writers use characters like artist's models; they "transform" people they know into characters (Goodwin, 1973).

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[1] Polly Devlin (1984) reports that she was in her late sixties, which would mean she wrote the novel right after her sister Susan's death. Without knowing when her daughters married, it is impossible to confirm the date of composition.

Good Behaviour has an even darker view about generational conflict than Keane's earlier novels. It opens with the Aroon St. Charles, trying to force her bedridden mother to eat rabbit, even though she knows that the old lady has always hated the dish. The scene is horrifying because Aroon is huge thus diminishing her frail and vulnerable mother. Her mother immediately realizes she has been tricked; the smell makes her vomit and she collapses and dies. At 57, Aroon has achieved her revenge. Clearly she has no sympathy for her mother and has not matured emotionally. In reaction to her mixed confusion and delight over her mother's death, she decides to look back at her past to see if "`I shall understand more about what became of us'" (Keane, 1983).

Keane looks at the past merely to explain why poor Aroon became such a monster, both physically and emotionally; she holds out no hope for the future. Neither she nor Aroon find the peace Butler says can be found in life review. Nor is there depression; instead a series of unpleasant revelations. Keane believes that Aroon was conditioned in childhood to become the unloving creature she became. Her narcissistic parents withheld the love she needed to become a loving person in her turn. In the jungle that Keane describes as family life, one is either a victim or a victimizer; peaceful coexistence is not possible. Still the novel served a real purpose for the writer; it ended Keane's writer's block. By exaggerating in the novel the trauma of her own upbringing and that of Susan, she managed to work

though some of her anger at her parents and take a satisfying revenge. Since then Keane has written three novels, an impressive amount for a woman in her eighties.

Although Bowen's work is very different from Keane's, she too used fiction as a way of displacing or recreating the life-review that she found it rather difficult to do in actual life. Fiction allowed her to forge meaning for her life when she could not do so in a direct fashion. Like Keane she was an Anglo-Irish writer and had a traumatic childhood. Her father had bouts of mental illness, and her mother died when Elizabeth was 13. She had been farmed out to a neighbor, so the news of her mother's death had come as a shock. Afterwards she was not able to talk about her mother's death at all until her late 50s when she began writing The Little Girls, which indirectly took up the matter of her mother's death (Glendinning, 1985).

The work of Felix Brown (1968), an English psychiatrist, sheds some light on Bowen's situation. He has demonstrated that when individuals who are orphaned early in life lose a spouse later on, the depression they experience shows "a regression to events in early life tinged with the same emotion, suggesting that it is a kind of reactivation of some previous experience" (Brown, 1968, p. 436). He notes that children between the ages of 8-12--Elizabeth was just 13--often feel guilty because of the parent's death. In Bowen's case, not only did she lose her mother unexpectedly, but her father had been an unreliable and often frightening figure in her life ever since she had been

five. Not surprisingly, the trauma left an imprint on her life and work in several ways. The novels are full of orphaned children, who become disruptive influences in their households. Being orphaned affected her personally as well: she became a compulsive writer and married a father figure with whom she had no sexual relations. As a result she had many affairs, mostly with men but at least two with women (Glendinning, 1985; Sarton, 1988).

Odd though the marriage was, it apparently met some important emotional needs of the writer. In consequence, when her husband died, Bowen at 53 felt that her world had broken up. In the ensuing depression she found it impossible to manage her financial affairs and ended by selling her 200 year old family estate, Bowen's Court, to a man who promptly tore it down (Glendinning, 1985). Feeling dispossessed she moved around a great deal and only managed to write 3 novels in 20 years, whereas in the previous 20 she had written 7. Still her last two novels are her most powerful even though they are confusing to the casual reader. In late life Bowen learned to express her anguish and hidden feelings more effectively than she had earlier in her career partly. As a result, her last two works contain evidence of her anguish not only over her disrupted childhood, but over her life with her husband.

The Little Girls, published when Bowen was 64, provided a turning point for her because fiction was the only place where she could allow herself to confront the sense of loss that she

had suppressed when her mother died. The novel has three seemingly disconnected chapters, which begin to cohere once one has read the entire work. In the first part, the protagonist, Dinah, a woman of 60, suddenly feels compelled to see two school friends she had last seen in 1914 when the outbreak of war disrupted their lives. She sends off advertisements to newspapers until her friends respond.

The second part consists of a flashback to 1914, the summer before the war began. Unlike the reconstruction of the past in the Keane novel, this reconstruction operates in a complex fashion. It mirrors Dinah's search for her own lost past while it provides the reader information necessary to understand what is happening in the present.

Three things stand out: First, Clare and Dinah have a special relationship which they barely understand. Clare's father and Dinah's mother, who is a widow, are in love, and their feelings unite the two girls. Second, the three girls spend a great deal of time burying a coffer (large box) into which each puts some special treasure. The details about the burial suggest that writing about the coffer provided a substitute for her mother's funeral, which she had not been allowed to attend. Third, the section of the novel and that section of the characters' lives end equally abruptly with an aborted leavetaking. Dinah leaves a picnic unable to say goodbye properly to her friend Clare, which upsets her. Only in the third section, however, do Dinah and Clare learn what happened

next. Clare's father dies in battle and Dinah's mother succumbs to the flu epidemic that followed the war (Bowen, 1982).

The final section is confusing, but Bowen uses the details to suggest that older people need to reconstruct the past and to seek means to compensate for its losses. But she also emphasizes that the effort has its dangers. The women dig up the coffer they had buried in 1914 and find it empty. Dinah is dismayed and turns to Clare for comfort, but Clare fears Dinah's attractiveness. She rejects Dinah's overtures, because she misunderstands the poor woman's motive. Dinah has a strange breakdown and accident and takes to her bed.

The novel, however, does not end tragically. Bowen emphasizes the strength of human ties--both of family and of friends--that makes it possible for these older women to gain new understanding in late life. Eventually the strands of the story are resurrected and retold, and at the end Dinah and Clare are reconciled. The novel ends on the recognition of loss and the hope for some restitution in the future.

Bowen, like Molly Keane, experienced a cathartic effect from completing the novel. After the novel was published, she bought a house in the town where her mother had died. As her biographer commented, that action completed "her return journey." She died there of lung cancer in 1973 (Glendinning, 1985).

In contrast to the two women writers, Peter Taylor has had far more good luck in his life. He grew up in Tennessee, lucky enough to meet other first rate writers of a similar background,

and never "felt the alienation from my background some writers seem to feel" (Goodwin, 1973). Although Taylor has not gone through the kind of wrenching changes of the two women, nonetheless he is not complacent. In his late sixties he has written a novel about reminiscence, Summons to Memphis, which deals in a compelling fashion directly with the problems of aging.

The Taylor novel contains a complete life review. The narrator, Phillip Carver, reexamines the details of his past, telling and retelling events until they take on new meaning in the present. The character's review is less confused than is Dinah's in Bowen's novel, undoubtedly because the author had already learned the lessons he needed to understand his life before he completed his work. The novel, like the others, describes a protagonist, whose childhood has been difficult. Phillip Carver, who grew up in Memphis, lives in New York with Holly Kaplan, a younger Jewish woman from Cleveland. Both are alienated from their families. Phillip's sisters--both in their fifties--beg him to come home to stop their 81 year-old father from remarrying. Before Phillip goes home, he recalls the salient features of their past life, in particular the disastrous move the family made from Nashville to Memphis some 20 years before.

The novel has autobiographical features. Taylor's family had a similar move in 1932, for much the same reasons. Taylor remembers being resentful because at 15 he had become interested

in some local girls. None of the children wanted to move. In Taylor's case, however, moving made him aware of regional differences and made him feel an outsider, all of which contributed to his desire to write. Writing he found was one way to establish control over his forbears, including his father (Thompson, 1987). Therefore compromise not alienation became his method of survival. Unlike Phillip, Taylor married happily, had children, and while often furious with his father was still aware of deeper feelings (Thompson, 1987). Eventually he realized that he had imitated his father's admirable qualities. As Toynbee put it, he was able to make use of his voluntary legacy (Brown, 1968).

Phillip, however, did not become a writer, and he is still resentful of the turn of events. Gradually his interpretation of events changes. He develops sympathy for his father's past behavior. He begins to understand that he uprooted his family for a mixture of heroic and quixotic reasons, and that at the age of 40 he insisted that his nearly grownup children accompany him because he needed their presence to give him strength. Thus weakness not strength turned Mr. Carver into a family tyrant. Unfortunately, he created a double bind for all members of the family. He insisted that they cut all ties to Nashville while remaining fiercely loyal. Of course that was an impossible task. The mother became an invalid when she discovered that she really liked Memphis. It was easier to stay housebound than to displease her husband. The father also kept the children from

marrying. Only Phillip's brother managed to escape. He enlisted in the army and was killed in the war.

In the final half of the book Phillip begins the task of reconciliation by reconstructing the story of his father's past. He and Holly talk ceaselessly about their parents trying to understand them. As it happens the sisters succeed in breaking up their father's marriage plans. But when they take him to Owl's Mountain, a summer watering spot, he meets his old nemesis, the man who forced him to leave Nashville in the first place. To the horror of the children, the two old men fall into each other's arms despite the years of hostility.

Phillip makes his final trip to Memphis when his sisters ask him to stop their father from visiting his old friend. At that point, Phillip does not know whose side he is on. However, he procrastinates long enough that his father receives a phone call announcing his friend's sudden death. Once his father has lost everything--fiancée, old friend, and health, Phillip becomes reconciled. He brightens up his father's remaining days by telephone calls in which they explore the past together to their mutual delight. The novel ends with Phillip contemplating his father's death and wondering about his fate with Holly. His fantasy is that the two of them will fade away together: "our serenity will merely have been translated into a serenity in another realm of being" (Taylor, 1987). Not for the first time one realizes Phillip's limitations. His "serene" life lacks children, continuity, and family ties. His father with all his

problems was more alive.

As the lives of these writers indicate, rather than causing depression as in the case of Butler's patients, reviewing their lives helped these introspective writers to work though their depression and anguish. Keane and Bowen literally wrote themselves out of a depression; Taylor's life has been more even than theirs, but he reports that fiction has always provided a way of finding out about other people (Broadway, 1985). He also asserts that "my writing is a by-product of my efforts to understand my life" (Goodwin, 1973).

Finally, whatever qualities of candor, serenity and wisdom these novels display, they are most notable for their sense of unresolved conflict and pain. Serenity and wisdom in old age are often described in static terms, but these writers do not value static virtues at all. Taylor even complains that his narrator, Phillip Carver, "is much too serene" (McAlexander, 1985-86).

None of these writers is smug. All three agree about the uncertainty of human existence and have learned to be grateful for the upheavals of their emotional lives because their creativity thrives on dynamic discomfort. Indeed what is most touching about their work is the sense that although nothing is resolved, nonetheless they have found the courage to face the pain that they have been avoiding all their lives, surely a kind of wisdom in Eriksonian terms. Although depression can provide an ever-constant threat, these crises have offered them an opportunity to review and rewrite their past, a process which in

turn led to a reconstruction of their artistic identities for old age.

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